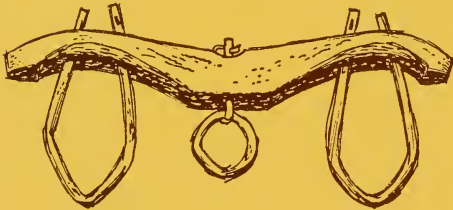


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Recollections of Abraham
Lincoln by Captain Nelson
Thomasson

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COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS

Recollections of Abraham Lincoln

Read before the Illinois Commandery of the Loyal Legion, February 3, 1927, and published by order of the Board of Officers.

By CAPTAIN NELSON THOMASSON

COMPANIONS:—The first time I ever heard of the name of Abraham Lincoln was some time in the '40's, when I was a mere boy; probably about 1846, or a little later. It was written in a book by my father. The book was about 4 by 10 inches in size and contained a lapel where odd papers were kept. On one page was the entry: "We came in the stage from Pittsburgh to Cumberland. In the vehicle was John Wentworth, of Chicago, and Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, Ill. We took the barge, or boat, at Cumberland and journeyed on to Washington, D. C." This book fell to me after the death of my brother, Col. C. L. Thomasson, who met his death at the head of Rousseau's Brigade at Missionary Ridge in 1863, and I kept it until the Chicago fire of 1871 burned it.

The first time I ever *saw* Lincoln was about the year 1858. My father and I were sitting out on a little balcony over the northeast corner of Clark and Randolph Streets, Corbin's cigar store. My father, looking east on Randolph, suddenly cried out: "There is old Abe Lincoln." He said to me: "Put on your hat and we will go and see him if he stops at the Sherman house," which he did, across the street. But, of course, Mr. Lincoln had hardly stepped down the several steps leading to the Sherman when he was surrounded by quite a number of admirers who seemed to spring from the ground and the planked sidewalk. Then I saw him daily for three weeks in 1860.

I was then a student of the Union College of Law, on the top floor of the Larmon block, northeast corner of Clark and Washington streets, now the Reaper block, on the same floor where Judge Drummond held the United States Court. Judge Henry Booth was then our dean, and one morning he addressed us, telling us that there would begin tomorrow one of the greatest trials that had ever come up in the annals of the United States court, and that he thought that it was his duty as the head of this law school to acquaint us of this fact, and saying if the class would promise to be there at eight o'clock A. M. he would meet us and we would go through a good part of the lectures by 10 A. M., which was the

time the United States Court opened. We students promptly said we would. There was a hare-lipped student about 45 or 50 years of age, a post-graduate named H. C. Whitney, and he said he had been a circuit rider with "Old Abe" and that he knew the United States Marshal, Campbell, quite well, and if the class (about 23 students) would promise to attend faithfully, he would see that seats would be reserved for us within the bar. All of which was carefully carried out.

Prof. Booth especially enjoined us to watch Edward F. Joy, who ran the trial, the chief counsel of the Michigan Central railroad, the main defendant. Mr. Lincoln sat next to Joy and was often consulted by Joy and other counsel. Lincoln often addressed the court, Judge Drummond. Lincoln wore his usual stovepipe hat, which was indented and battered in toward the top, and half full of papers.

I was present at the Republican convention in 1860 in the "Wigwam," at the southeast corner of Lake and Market streets, and only a few feet away from Norman B. Judd when he nominated Abraham Lincoln for President; that happened because I was next to the tallest man in "The Wideawakes," and A. H. Andrews, the large furniture man, the next tallest. We marched in, on either side of the hall up to the stage, and a few minutes after reaching there Mr. Judd got up and nominated Lincoln. After Judd (who was the head of the Illinois delegation) had concluded, Sheol broke loose. But the great speech of the day (or rather night) was made by Birmingham, of Massachusetts, who got the ministry to China therefor.

Again I saw Lincoln at his own house in Springfield, Ill., just after his nomination. But such a crowd was there that we beat a retreat from that city as quickly as possible.

The next time I saw Lincoln he was the President of the United States. I had enlisted in the Sturges Rifles, which, after going through the campaign of West Virginia, went with McClellan to Washington after Gen. Scott had been relieved. The Sturges Rifles and Barker Dragoons were the only two companies in the vast army that were not regimented, to coin a word. They had enlisted as escort companies and followed Gen. McClellan wherever he went. For months when "Little Mack" was whipping up the army into a truly well disciplined shape, we, the Sturges Rifles and Barker Dragoons, had a splendid time, save the eternal drill. But from the first of September to the middle of December, 1861, I saw Lincoln almost daily, and that shawl now at the Chicago Historical Society was, and is, very familiar to me. John Hay was his private secretary, and John's mother and my mother were sisters. And he (John) was very kind to me. We used to meet almost nightly in the executive mansion and have a tin pail of Sand's cream ale—a Chicago concoction of suds, and no kick therein—but we youngsters innocently thought it fine.

Letter to Secretary Stanton

Executive Mansion.
January 29, 1863.

DEAR SIR:


Mr. Speed tells me you wish to appoint him to some agency about the Goose Creek Salt works, and he wishes to decline it, and that W. P. Thomasson may be appointed. I personally know Mr. Thomasson to be an honest and very competent man, and fully in sympathy with the administration. I think he should be appointed.

Yours truly,

A. LINCOLN.

Since the completion of Commander Thomasson's paper I found the above letter commendatory of his father. I think it should supplement and accompany his paper.

BERNIS W. SHERMAN,
Recorder.



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Lincoln
Room

President Lincoln was ever on the alert to learn. At a reception, I remember, John Hay, the introducer, presented Prof. Agassiz to President Lincoln, and before he shook hands with the professor he asked him how he pronounced his name.

Another time early one hot Sunday morning, Hay, Robert Hitt and young Villard, who afterward married Garrison's daughter and became President of the Northern Pacific railroad, and I were in the basement of the old war department building, used then as a telegraph office, and Lincoln came in, said something pleasant and then passed by us to where the telegraph blanks were on a rack. He picked up one and began writing quickly. Suddenly he stopped and looked at us, and said, "Young gentlemen, when do you use a seimcolon?" Villard and Hitt were our "literary cusses" and they quickly said a lot, but I do not remember a single word they said. But Lincoln, after taking the pen from his mouth, said; "I never use it much, but when I am in doubt what to use, I generally employ the 'little fellow.'"

And now we will approach a matter which I am astonished that some of the biographies of Lincoln never alluded to, although Henry Clay Whitney said he intended to, but did not know where to enter it in his book. And that was the way Lincoln enunciated his words. No one had to ask Lincoln the second time for an answer. He had a way of throwing his head forward and his lips and features away from his teeth that allowed his words to come forth, and his auditors heard his clearness and distinctness with pleasure. He had imitators. Some say that Robert R. Hitt made his successful career by mimicking Lincoln in this peculiarity. Gov. Oglesby and Gen. John A. Logan used to allude to "Bob Hitt acting like Lincoln."

John Hay always contended that Lincoln popularized the crisp bacon that we now have at our daily breakfast. We had fried salt pork called "fitch."

But Lincoln, out at the old soldiers' home where he used to spend the hot summers, introduced a new way to fry this new bacon into a crisp that became very popular. Lincoln used to say he discovered this mode on his riding circuit. About the same time General McClellan introduced the mustache. About this same period Kimbark, of Chicago, had a mustache, but none other I can remember had; but when "Little Mack" wore his, then everybody did, and as to sidewhiskers, hardly none wore them until General Burnside brought them out.

The last time I ever saw Lincoln was at what we called the 50,000 review of regulars, meaning thereby the regular army and veterans so-called in the army of the Potomac, on old Capitol hill. McClellan was there in all his glory. Lincoln with McClellan and staff rode up and down the ranks and the troops, I thought, once were about to fall down and worship "Father Abraham."

Lincoln was a big politician—there was none greater than he.

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Note how he wrote James Speed, his attorney general, to urge my father, W. P. Thomasson, ex-member of Congress from Louisville, to accept office in Kentucky. It is recorded in Nicolay and Hay's works.

Do I believe that the assassination of Lincoln and the issuing of the emancipation proclamation helped the name and fame of Lincoln? I do. Yet do not for one moment think that he was not a great man. The paper on which the freeing of the 4,000,000 slaves was written was burnt in our Chicago fire, but the 4,000,000 beings are still free and with their numerous posterity will always be with us.

But if you wish to know how great Lincoln was, read his note in reply to Secretary Seward's "THOUGHTS," April 1, 1861; his letter to General Hooker, January 26, 1863, (after the latter had taken command of the army before Chancellorsville). Also read his letter to General Meade, July 14, 1863, after Gettysburg, and his second inaugural address.

I am very proud of my maternal grandfather, the Reverend David A. Leonard, who now lies buried at Corydon, Indiana. He died and was buried there when Corydon was the capital of Chicago and the Northwest territory. He made an excellent oration on the death of George Washington which I tried to find, but could not.

However, here is a better one delivered by Abraham Lincoln himself:

"Washington's is the mightiest name on earth—long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty; still mightiest in the moral reformation. On that name no eulogy is expected. It cannot be. To add brightness to the sun or glory to the name of Washington, is alike impossible. Let no one attempt it. In solemn awe we pronounce his name and in its naked deathless splendor leave it shining on."

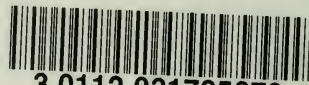
Often near my office in the Conway building I see visitors craning their necks, with heads thrown back, trying to see the cross on the Temple, across the street, when, if they would walk back a block or more away they could see so much better.

The same applies to the fame of Abraham Lincoln, the longer he is physically dead, the greater will his name be glorified.

NELSON THOMASSON.

Note:—At the conclusion of this paper, the note, letters and second inaugural address, above referred to, were read.

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